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ABSTRACT

The basic premise of this paper is that decisions about children and their early educational experiences are culturally situated and, by definition, will reflect varying interpretations of appropriate educational aims and strategies. Drawing upon three decades of experience in the Italian culture as well as preliminary findings from a collaborative research project with several Italian communities (including Milan, Trento, Reggio Emilia, Parma, and San Miniato), the paper emphasizes the necessity and validity of diverse interpretations of early childhood programs, the relationship between goals for children and societal expectations for adults, and the importance of adult relationships (among parents, teachers, and community members) to the negotiation of educational goals for children growing up in a pluralistic democratic society. (Author)

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What Should Children Learn? Making Choices and Taking Chances

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Abstract

The basic premise of this paper is that decisions about children and their early educational experiences are culturally situated and, by definition, will reflect varying interpretations of appropriate educational aims and strategies. Drawing upon three decades of experience in the Italian culture as well as preliminary findings from a collaborative research project with five Italian communities (including Milan, Trento, Reggio Emilia, Parma, and San Miniato), the paper emphasizes the necessity and validity of diverse interpretations of early childhood programs, the relationship between goals for children and societal expectations for adults, and the importance of adult relationships (among parents, teachers, and community members) to the negotiation of educational goals for children growing up in a pluralistic democratic society.

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Introduction

Debates on educational goals and content are older than the concept of schooling itself. Controversies regarding learning goals and objectives for children prior to the age of compulsory schooling have their own particular tenor. The importance attributed to adult decisions about how *or if* to formally educate young children is based on more than the need to prioritize educational aims; such decisions are inextricably linked to views about children themselves and their relationship to the larger society. As we approach the end of the 20th century, the significance of this question is heightened by a convergence of new understandings regarding young children's intellectual competencies and emotional vulnerabilities. Conflicting interpretations of the practical significance of this contemporary image of the child are exacerbated by increasingly polarized debates about whose responsibility it is to provide *and pay for* educational settings in which children's potentials are enhanced rather than wasted (Kagan & Cohen, 1996). Less often debated but essential to the resolution of both issues—the provision of educational

opportunities and the determination of curriculum goals—are the questions of what is meant by potential and who gets to decide (Kessler & Swadener, 1992; New, 1999).

The purpose of this paper is to consider the concept of children's potential as it is interpreted and supported by an early childhood curriculum. This discussion represents a first step in responding to the question—*What should preschool children learn?*—recently posed to me by the Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, a group of scholars convened by the National Academy of Sciences and the National Research Council to address issues of educational goals and content in the preschool age period.

What *Can* Children Learn? Just about Anything, It Seems

Historic depictions of young children make clear their remarkable capacity to learn what is expected of them, whether that entails sleeping alone or with others, feeding and dressing one's self or caring for a younger sibling, crafting delicate origami or herding cattle, learning to speak sign language or to speak only when spoken to. Several decades of comparative research build upon this theoretical premise, with studies on parental behavior joined by those that include teachers as participants and classrooms as research sites. Such studies reveal the contexts and consequences of parental belief systems (Goodnow & Collins, 1990; Harkness & Super, 1995; LeVine, 1974) and the multiple images of childhood (Hwang, Lamb, & Sigel, 1996), each of which contributes to variations in cultural practices that serve as contexts for children's development (Goodnow, Miller, & Kessel, 1995). Such studies also support the hypothesis that what educators want for and do with young children within the contexts of institutional settings also reflect deeply held cultural values and beliefs, including contemporary assumptions about what is normative, feasible, necessary, *and good*.

This collection of beliefs regarding the sociocultural construction of reality, including but not limited to the cultural situatedness of notions of pedagogy (Gordon, 1995), has been subsumed within the emerging field of cultural psychology (Shweder, 1997). This field of study has much to contribute to current debate regarding children's potentials and associated adult responsibilities as they inform a preschool educational agenda. Research on children's care and early educational experiences in countries as diverse as China (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989); Japan (Lewis, 1995; Peak, 1992); and Sweden, Mexico, Italy, and Africa (LeVine, Miller, & West, 1988; LeVine, Dixon, LeVine, Richman, Leiderman, Keefer, & Brazelton, 1994) all have lessons for educators and policy makers grappling with the multiple and complex choices to be made. The Italian culture provides a fascinating context within which to explore this expanded set of theoretical premises as well as to demonstrate children's remarkable abilities to live up to a wide range of adult expectations.

What *Should* Children Learn? Contemporary Italians Have Their Own Ideas

Contemporary early childhood policies and programs in Italy are linked to that culture's enduring values as well as its more contemporary beliefs regarding the optimal course of a child's development. Some of those values and beliefs are reflected in the passage, in 1968, of Law No. 444 proclaiming pre-primary school as a right of all children. This law also acknowledges the legitimacy of diverse regional and municipal interpretations of *scuola materna—or scuole dell'infanzia*, as they are now often regarded—and specifies the critical role of parents in determining key features of children's early educational experiences. Although the 1968 law for universal preschool has never been fully

implemented, particularly in the south, well over 90% of Italian 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children attend one of three types of *scuole materna*: state funded, private (often church affiliated), or municipal (Note 1) (New, 1993). The expectation for municipally funded, locally organized services is quite high throughout the north and central parts of the country. The regions of Lombardia, Emilia Romagna, and Tuscany have played leadership roles in the provision of these services as well as national discussions of high-quality early care and education. The cities of Milano, Reggio Emilia, Parma, Modena, Pistoia, and San Miniato are among those whose programs for young children serve as exemplars of this triage of cultural values, regional support, and local interpretation.

Two decades of experiences within these and other Italian communities have contributed substantially to my current understandings about the possibilities of national policies (and financial support) for early childhood programs within a context characterized by change and subcultural diversity. Key principles of an Italian early education—the triangulation of a national policy establishing children's rights to a prescholastic experience with emphases on local variation and parental participation—serve as the basis for the current research project with colleagues in Reggio Emilia and the University of Milan, taking place in the cities of Reggio Emilia, Milano, Trento, Parma, and San Miniato (Note 2). The original impetus for the study was to situate Reggio Emilia's accomplishments within the larger Italian context, with a primary focus on home-school relationships, an essential but understudied aspect of this internationally acclaimed communal early childhood program (New, 1997). By nature of its multiple research sites, the study also provides an opportunity to expand upon a theory of sociocultural activity that considers subcultural settings as multiple reflections of and contributors to the larger cultural gestalt. Research strategies, designed to examine beliefs and practices associated with home-school relations and the purposes of early care and education, include ethnographic observations, semistructured interviews with parents and teachers, and questionnaires on educational aims and optimal child development. At this point in the study, 225 hour-long interviews (with parents, teachers, administrators, advisory council members, or other historical informants) have been conducted and approximately 2,400 parent and teacher questionnaires have been collected. Additional data include case study documentation in Reggio Emilia and observations on home-school practices in each of the sample institutions.

Initial findings that have emerged over the course of this research investigation, coupled with more recent experiences in other Italian communities such as Pistoia, Naples, and Palermo (Note 3), are germane to the challenges posed at the beginning of this discussion. Three features that characterize the municipal early childhood programs in each of these settings draw sustenance and coherence from larger Italian cultural values. These same features also have much to contribute to the further articulation of educational goals for preschool children in the United States:

- the significance attributed to children's **social relationships**,
- the **congruence** between developmental goals for children and the communal/civic expectations of the adults, and
- the **diversity of interpretations** associated with the promotion of these social relations.

The Importance of Being Together

The cultural value of interdependent relationships (New, 1998b) has been apparent throughout my many years of visiting and living in Italy. Each of my adult Italian friends lives in close proximity or contact with extended family members, and the young research assistants in our current project all reside in the same towns or cities as their parents. Interdependence with family members does not suffice, however, to illustrate the Italian belief in the importance of multiple and close human relationships. Family members—and sometimes entire families—participate in the afternoon *passagiata* so that they can

commingle with other citizens of their community. The presence and participation of children is integral to this cultural routine, and children-in-relation—with family members, neighbors, and other children—are often the center of adult interest. This valuing of social relationships is apparent in casual observations, where children are greeted and played with by adults for purposes of pleasure rather than distraction, as well as in the educational priorities mentioned most often by participants in the ongoing research study.

In each of the five participating cities, during interviews, on questionnaires, and in casual conversations, Italian parents and teachers acknowledged the critical role of early childhood programs in helping young children learn how to *stare insieme* [be together] with other adults and other children. Although this educational aim was sometimes attributed to the rapid increase in single-child households in Italy and the declining role of extended-family members in child care, others made clear that children need more than the family—they need experiences that will introduce them to life in a community. One mother in Reggio Emilia went so far as to proclaim that within the first few months of life, the child "needs to learn to live in a community with others. And the community needs to respond to her as a citizen with that right." At the same time, this mother, along with other parents and teachers, emphasized that neither the *asilo nido* nor the *scuola dell'infanzia* could in any way *replace* the role of the family. Rather, even the very young Italian child needs and deserves opportunities to develop multiple and complementary relationships.

Adult Relations as Model and Means

The care of young Italian children has historically been viewed as a social responsibility, even as the family has traditionally assumed the primary role. From this perspective, the child serves as a catalyst for adults to interact and communicate with one another. Within the context of early care and education settings, this sense of shared responsibility broadens the focus from parents and relatives to include teachers and other citizens, each of whom must develop effective relationships with each other. The importance attributed to these multiple adult relations on behalf of children is acknowledged in two national guidelines for Italy's early childhood services, the first associated with the period of *l'inserimento* [home-school transition] and the other related to the *gestione sociale* or social management of the day care or preschool setting. Many of the municipal programs previously described have contributed to the conceptualization of these guidelines; each gives particular emphasis to the critical role of the adult relations in contributing to the quality of children's early educational experiences.

L'inserimento: Welcoming the child and family to child care. Municipal *asili nido* (infant-toddler centers) such as those in Parma and Modena were instrumental in drawing national attention to the child's first transition to out-of-home care, and research in those settings continues to address issues of child, parent, and teacher responses to the challenges of new relationships (Terzi, Cantarelli, Berziga, & Battaglioli, 1997). Strategies that have been developed by teachers collaborating with university researchers include inviting parents to remain in the center with the newly enrolled child for as long as they think necessary, even for a period of weeks or even months (Bove, 1999). Educators emphasize the utility of this strategy as a means of establishing trusting relationships between parents and teachers as well as to assist the child. Such experiences are also seen as essential for the teacher to become acquainted with the interpersonal dynamics of the mother-child dyad (Mantovani, 1997).

Educators in other Italian settings also regard the transition period as critical to the development of successful relationships, although many handle the child's initial *l'inserimento* differently. In each of the cities participating in the research project, educators articulate the rationale and their particular strategies designed to make this "delicate moment" in the life of the child and family a successful

experience for everyone. In most cities where we have studied, the *l'inserimento* process focuses on the first days or week(s) of school. Reggio Emilia educators, in contrast, see the process of transition as part of a continuous cycle of exchange that is not limited to the child's initial entry into a program. Thus, Reggio Emilian educators create numerous opportunities for parents and children to meet and participate in informal events well in advance of the child's formal attendance. During the first week of school, parents and children come together to the center, where mothers or fathers work closely with the teacher to help the child explore the new physical and social environment. As the children become more comfortable, parents gradually move to adjacent rooms where they work together on the creation of materials for the classroom, discuss menus with the cook, or develop an agenda for subsequent parent meetings. During recent observations in one Reggio Emilian *asilo nido*, a group of parents alternated turns checking back into the classroom (even peeking through a window from the outside) to make sure that all of the newly enrolled infants were content. Their strategies of supporting this principle of "welcoming" also insure that parents develop relationships with each other and with each other's children.

Gestione Sociale: Social Management of Children's Early Educational Experiences. Another way in which Italians conceptualize relationships between children's families, community members, and the early childhood professionals is in the organizational concept of *gestione sociale*, a principle of social management and participation that was first articulated in regard to civic functions and labor management. The first public structure to actually legislate the concept of *gestione sociale*, however, was the municipal *asilo nido* of Reggio Emilia. This principle of parent and citizen participation was characteristic of Reggio Emilia's earliest efforts, and educators in the city played a leadership role in articulating the importance and practical elements of this interpretation of parent involvement. By 1971, their influence was felt at the national level when Article 6 of Law 444 affirmed that day care centers and preschools *"devono essere gestiti con la partecipazione delle famiglie"* [must be managed with the participation of the families] as well as with representatives of social organizations within the region. Today, each of the municipal programs participating in the research project previously identified has some form of citizen or parent counsel or management group, with varying degrees of authority, responsibility, and status. In every community, there is the recognition that parental participation is an essential ingredient to the determination of program success in meeting the needs of the community's children and their families.

Reggio Emilia educators repeatedly emphasize that "no one has a monopoly" on what children need and, as noted above, invite parents to become partners prior to, throughout, and even beyond their child's participation in the city's municipal programs. Because this form of parent and citizen participation is inextricable from and essential to the other better known features of the Reggio Emilia municipal program, the concept of *partecipazione* has, in fact, become a primary focus of the current research study. Because of the linkage that develops between parents and the program as a whole, many Reggio Emilian parents remain active participants in the city's school management council long after the children have left the program. Such continuity and longevity of personal commitment not only attests to the importance adults attribute to their own involvement in children's early out-of-home experiences, it also provides the basis for community and financial support for programs such as those found in Reggio Emilia, Pistoia, and San Miniato.

There is much more to be shared regarding these two national policies and their related strategies in the cities mentioned above. The point of this discussion, however, is not so much that adults are involved with their child and his or her educational experience, but that they also become involved with each other. Although there is no expectation that such adult relations will always be harmonious, there *is* the widely shared belief in their essential nature. As essential as adult and child relationships are, however, once we move beyond the particulars of each city's programs to consider the whole, a third

characteristic of Italy's early childhood services also becomes visible—the right of each community to determine the particular features of its own programs, including its interpretations of parental participation.

Common Ground, Diverse Strategies. This cultural emphasis on children's and adults' relationships appears widespread, and Italian preschool programs are characterized by a variety of organizational and pedagogical strategies designed to support this broad educational imperative. Although all Italian schools (including elementary) strive to keep groups of children and families together over the course of their enrollment, municipal *scuole dell'infanzia* (pre-primary schools for 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children) have developed diverse staffing patterns and curriculum strategies to further promote children's social relations. Parents and teachers in the tiny hill town of San Miniato, for example, decided that mixed-age grouping was a strategic means by which to create a classroom community of children from 6 months to 3 years. This strategy was responsive to the adults' shared desire to promote prosocial behaviors and affiliative relationships in children without older or younger siblings, and the strategy afforded parents the opportunity to serve as supports for one another, giving and receiving advice on their children's varying developmental crises and accomplishments. Communal preschools in the metropolis of Milan also promote adult and child relationships in a variety of ways, including the hiring of a permanent extra teacher so that no substitutes are necessary in the case of teacher absence. In response to the diverse needs of immigrant and working families in a city the size of Milan, municipal early childhood professionals—again in collaboration with university researchers—established a number of family-child centers (*Tempo per la Famiglia*) for families whose children are not attending full-time child care.

It is not only through staffing, class organizational patterns, and alternative programming that these Italian early childhood programs support social relationships. Curriculum projects also support and maintain children's relationships with each other, with their teachers, and with the larger community. In some of Milan's *scuole dell'infanzia,* for example, children's initial interests and explorations in a particular media or domain (e.g., 3-year-olds' play in dirt and sand castles or their fascination with light or fear of the dark) are elaborated upon and sustained throughout the next two years, thereby creating a source of continuity and identity within each group of children, teachers, and their families. Parents, teachers, and children in Parma's communal *scuole* work hard to identify schoolwide themes that link children and classrooms, through murals, constructions, and donated relics that spread throughout the halls and libraries.

The tradition of apprenticeship characterizes the curriculum in Pistoia's municipal preschools, with an emphasis, for example, on needlework and sewing in one preschool and carpentry in another. These diverse emphases were *not* selected because of children's initiatives; rather, they represent areas of expertise and passionate pursuit among some of the adults in the school and neighborhood settings. The explicit goal, in this case, is to create opportunities for children to work with and learn from the adults as a means of connecting them to each other and to the larger community. The choice of the curriculum topic is less critical than its attributes: multiple avenues of exploration and practical use, with numerous and meaningful opportunities for creative thinking and skill development, each requiring some form of collaborative endeavor that links children to adults, school to community.

Certainly the best known of the Italian explorations in preschool curriculum is that of the municipal *scuole dell'infanzia* in Reggio Emilia. Virtually every feature (organizational, structural, pedagogical) in the city's several dozen preschools is designed to foster and maintain children's and adult's relationships with one another, from the organization of the physical environment to the long-term *progettazione* (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998). Even the classroom environment serves to connect children and families, past and present. Documentation panels purposefully promote the importance of *children* learning together, rather than highlighting the individual child. Photographic displays also

consistently include examples and images of former children and their families, thereby contributing to the sense of continuity and connection between one cohort of children and those coming before and after. In Reggio Emilia, as well as in the other cities described, educational aims and objectives include the fostering and utilization of relationships among and between adults as well as children (New, 1998c).

In each of the examples cited, adult and child relationships are supported through the child's home-school transition and the partnership expressed through the school management councils. These adult relations also influence curriculum decisions, such as those described in Pistoia, Parma, and Reggio Emilia. Parents and teachers in these cities have engaged in small- and large-scale discussions on the purposes and aims of their early childhood program, contributing to the dynamics of program development as well as the richness and diversity of adult relationships in the respective settings.

This collective belief in the importance of social relationships and the associated diversity of strategies is also reflected in recent educational reform initiatives within Italy. For example, the city of Naples, in "twinning" partnership with Reggio Emilia, has embarked on a project to create and support a number of new *asili nido* and *scuole dell'infanzia* in the city, with a major focus on connecting work with children to the lives and interests of adults. As has happened for years in Reggio Emilia, such an interpretation of schooling as a "system of relations" serves a powerful advocacy role. Thus, children and teachers in one Naples preschool proudly displayed the bottles of "wine" complete with "DOC" labels of origin that the children had produced, using time-honored traditions and tools as well as the support from their parents and grandparents. And what were the curriculum goals for this project? Certainly one of the aims was to connect children to their grandparents, many of whom were no longer providing their care and therefore perhaps not a part of their daily lives. This activity also served to advocate for the school itself, in a community where the concept of out-of-home child care, much less the idea of educational experiences for the preschool child, is still vulnerable to a more traditional image of children and child care. Families felt involved in rather than excluded from their children's early educational experiences. Children learned new skills (coordinating efforts, measuring, pouring, labeling), and teachers were inspired to seek other curriculum projects that could connect children and adults, inspiring everyone to collaborate and solve problems associated with an enterprise that mattered in the surrounding sociocultural context.

Although it is unlikely that preschoolers in the United States will embark on a wine-making project, the principles associated with an Italian early childhood education have much to contribute to American discussions of early educational services. Clearly, when adults continue to come to parent-teacher meetings long after their children have left the program, when children's preschool projects range in focus from the rituals of wine making and the physics of shadows of ants to the vicissitudes of love and death, war and peace, there is something more being considered about children's potentials and what they *should* learn than the days of the week on a calendar, much less how to sit still and leave each other alone.

Back to the Question

Discussions with American early childhood educators reflect our national ambivalence about a preschool education, especially when teachers are asked to prioritize their goals, aims, and objectives for young children. Even as they frequently mention these latter objectives (*sitting still, keeping their hands "to themselves"*), teachers also talk about the importance of promoting the child's self-esteem (Katz, 1995). At the same time that teachers and parents talk about the value of autonomy and

communicative competencies, they also include *learning to listen* and *working independently* as objectives for children's learning. When asked what children need to know before entering kindergarten, many teachers in the United States emphasize the importance of readiness in basic academic skills. This American interest in the independent and competent academic learner is in marked contrast to the Italian cultural valuing of social relations. And yet, American parents and teachers are also increasingly concerned about the young child's developing ability to solve problems and communicate effectively, to make friends and keep them, to resolve conflicts and negotiate agreements, and to develop safe ways to deal with negative emotions (Berman, 1997). As the media continue to remind us of the sometimes tragic consequences when such skills and dispositions go undeveloped, a burgeoning body of research also suggests that children's social competencies and relationships are directly linked with their subsequent school achievement and mental health. And so we've added social skills and creative self-expression to the already burgeoning list of "basics" in the early childhood curriculum, including preliteracy skills and understandings, multilingualism, technological skills, and prenumeracy and scientific thinking competencies—what's a teacher to do with these expectations?

When I was a classroom teacher, I struggled with my own need for social and academic reference points that were appropriate for the diverse population of children in my care. Ultimately, two rules were constructed that helped us—the children and me—negotiate countless decisions that we faced during our time together:

- Make this room a nice place to be . . . for everyone.
- Everyone has to do something hard every day.

These rules were useful enough that they survived my remaining years in the classroom. These rules also come close to capturing the essence of my vision of a curriculum worthy of imposing on young children. But on what bases did I make these negotiated agreements with the children in my classroom? What's "hard" for a 5-year-old? What's "hard" and also important enough to foster within the school environment? Clearly, I drew upon my own professional training and values, even as I gave significant credence to children's understandings of their social and emotional needs, not to mention their educational aims and interests. As I reflect on these early teaching experiences, I find some degree of satisfaction in my emphasis on children's social relations and the respect that I had for children's ideas as well as their imagined potentials. And yet, although I would have not imagined such a need at the time, I now understand that something (or someone) was missing from these negotiations: the children's families, other teachers, community members.

Conclusion

It has been noted by many others, including those who have studied U.S. and Italian early childhood policies and programs, that the concept of childhood is socially constructed (Saraceno, 1984) and culturally situated (Woodhead, Faulkner, & Littleton, 1998). The utility of cross-national comparisons, therefore, is likely through their ability to illuminate these diverse images of young children and not, as some would wish, in their ability to generate "good and reliable indices of educational effectiveness across countries" (Katz, 1999, p. 5). That is not to say, however, that studies in one cultural context may not be revealing about policies and practices in another (Lubeck, 1995). The politics of early education in the United States and the findings from the research being conducted in Italy are consistent with recent analyses of multiple and diverse interpretations of quality in early childhood services (Moss & Pence, 1994). Combined, they point to the need for a larger audience and a more deliberative debate than often characterize our professional deliberations on what is meant by children's potentials.

In conclusion, I would like to rephrase the question posed at the beginning of this paper—"What *should* children learn?"—with a more essential first question: What should *adults* do to insure that children learn those skills, knowledge, and concepts that reflect their individual needs, interests, and capabilities; promote their inclusion and full participation in a democratic society; and protect their rights as citizens to that knowledge that will enhance their current and future lives and productivity?

Educators have often referred to the classroom (early childhood and otherwise) as a "community of learners," and recent interpretations of this theme of community have emphasized the importance of inclusive physical, social, and intellectual environments as they might support the learning and development of all young children, including those of diverse cultural backgrounds as well as those with special needs (Mallory, 1998; New, 1998a). This article expands upon this definition of an inclusive community. To respond to the question of what children should learn, given the above perspective, requires that adults take stock of the current life of the community as it appears *inside and out* of the classroom and imagine how it might be better. The previously described classroom rules of several decades ago were based on my personal beliefs, my professional knowledge, and my political convictions of "how things ought to be" (New, 1999) And yet, as the wealth of comparative literature on cultural and subcultural groups here, in Italy, and elsewhere in the world makes clear, there is more than one interpretation of such a good life. Does that mean that anything goes? I hope not.

The Italian efforts described previously suggest several principles that might well support more effective and equitable processes for determining what adults hope and plan for young children in the United States:

- **Foster diversity in quality and respect the quality in diversity.**

  There is no single Italian early childhood curriculum anymore than there is a single American curriculum (Cornbleth, 1998) or Japanese curriculum (Holloway, in press). Even Reggio Emilia's understandings of curriculum continue to evolve as a result of their work with young children (New, in press). And yet, there are certain common features that appear to be essential in all of the Italian communities where we have studied, features that reflect adult intentionality in maintaining connections between the culture at large and early educational experiences. Many of these features are directly linked to Italy's self-image as an increasingly pluralistic democratic society. Thus, an Italian approach to curriculum—at least as observed in the previously described communities—requires the ongoing documentation and discussion of what children are and should be doing, by parents, teachers, and community members. What the diverse programs also have in common is a belief in the value of active citizen participation as the best means to promote and maintain a democratic society. Educational aims for young children are directed at and supported by these adult values and beliefs. From this perspective, quality becomes a function of multiple perspectives (Woodhead, 1996) based on personal knowledge and active engagement as opposed to some outsider judgment (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999). There is no national delineation of developmentally appropriate practices; rather, the presence of negotiated diversity becomes, itself, a quality indicator (Mallory & New, 1994).

- **Learn about children in order to teach them well.**

  Negotiated discussions with parents and community members will only be as successful as the teacher is knowledgeable about the children at the center of the conversation. Teacher knowledge, in turn, must include information about children's lives outside the classroom as well as their performance within it (New, 1994). Teacher isolation makes it difficult for teachers to evaluate

the consequences, for example, of English-language immersion programs or to advocate for providing children *and their parents* with opportunities to explore new computer technologies. By venturing outside the classroom, teachers become more cognizant of the characteristics and possibilities in children's lives. Because Italian children stay together in the same classroom for years, teachers have ample and necessary opportunity to develop relationships with children (and their families and the larger community). This organizational feature, coupled with the growing practice to utilize documentation strategies as a form of ongoing assessment, create conditions for learning—and negotiating agreements about learning goals—that most American teachers and parents can currently only dream of.

- **Keep the doors wide open.**

  Teachers need not only to know *about* children's family lives, they also need to actively engage parents in dialogue about purposes of education (New, 1992). Such conversations help teachers with pedagogical decisions; they also invite more children and their families into the classroom. Only through such personal encounters with families and community members could U.S. teachers be expected to begin to understand, for example, why it is that Latino parents are suspicious of preschool academic curriculum (Fuller, Eggers-Pierola, Holloway, Liang, & Rambaud, 1996). Such engagement can go a long way to helping teachers in our pluralistic society recognize others' cultural frames of reference (Ogbu, 1994), and, in the case of Latino families, helping them begin to understand what their resistance to preschool means about their positions in the larger American society. Such an educational environment is not only healthy for young children, it is also conducive to the social construction of new knowledge as adults learn from one another. This extension of adult relationships builds upon the theoretical principles of diversity that Dewey (1926) advocated for and are now seen as essential in any democratic community of learners (Garrison, 1995). It also creates a means by which the early childhood classroom assumes a moral stance for children (DeVries & Zan, 1994) *and* the adults who send them there.

What Else Should Young Children Learn?

Perhaps the biggest gift that I have received from the Italian friends and colleagues with whom I have worked for the past two decades is the basic understanding that cultural differences are not necessarily predefined. Rather, they often reflect the choices adults make and the chances they take with their lives. Because so many Italian adults seem to understand that these choices influence the chances, current and future, of young children, they take that responsibility not just *seriously* but also *personally*. To that end, what I would most ardently advocate for, in discussions about "what children should learn," is that young American children would come to understand that what they do and think and feel is important to the adults who know and care about them . . . so important that we are willing and able to learn new skills, develop new relationships, and work together on their behalf.

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Notes

1. The term "preschool" in Italy refers to programs serving 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children; compulsory schooling begins at age 6 in Italy.

2. This research is funded by the Spencer Foundation's Major Grants Program and has taken place in two phases. Phase I: The Sociocultural Construction of Home-School Relations: The Case of Reggio Emilia and Contemporary Italy, Principal Investigators Rebecca New and Bruce Mallory (1996-1998). Phase II: Italian Concepts of Community, Social Responsibility, and Civic Participation: Childcare as Metaphor, Principal Investigators Rebecca New and Susanna Mantovani (1998-present).

3. Early childhood programs in these cities were visited as part of a recent Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) review team.

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